

Why We Went to War

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From the October 20, 2003 issue: The case for the war in Iraq, with testimony from Bill Clinton.

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"When I left office, there was a substantial amount of biological and chemical material unaccounted for. That is, at the end of the first Gulf War, we knew what he had. We knew what was destroyed in all the inspection processes and that was a lot. And then we bombed with the British for four days in 1998. We might have gotten it all; we might have gotten half of it; we might have gotten none of it. But we didn't know. So I thought it was prudent for the president to go to the U.N. and for the U.N. to say you got to let these inspectors in, and this time if you don't cooperate the penalty could be regime change, not just continued sanctions."

--Bill Clinton, July 22, 2003

FORMER PRESIDENT CLINTON is right about what he and the whole world knew about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction programs. And most of what everyone knew about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction had nothing to do with this or any other government's intelligence collection and analysis. Had there never been a Central Intelligence Agency--an idea we admit sounds more attractive all the time--the case for war against Iraq would have been rock solid. Almost everything we knew about Saddam's weapons programs and stockpiles, we knew because the Iraqis themselves admitted it.

Here's a little history that seems to have been completely forgotten in the frenzy of the past few months. Shortly after the first Gulf War in 1991, U.N. inspectors discovered the existence of a surprisingly advanced Iraqi nuclear weapons program. In addition, by Iraq's own admission and U.N. inspection efforts, Saddam's regime possessed thousands of chemical weapons and tons of chemical weapon agents. Were it not for the 1995 defection of senior Iraqi officials, the U.N. would never have made the further discovery that Iraq had manufactured and equipped weapons with the deadly chemical nerve agent VX and had an extensive biological warfare program.

Here is what was known by 1998 based on Iraq's own admissions:

* That in the years immediately prior to the first Gulf War, Iraq produced at least 3.9 tons of VX, a deadly nerve gas, and acquired 805 tons of precursor ingredients for the production of more VX.

- * That Iraq had produced or imported some 4,000 tons of ingredients to produce other types of poison gas.
- * That Iraq had produced 8,500 liters of anthrax.
- * That Iraq had produced 500 bombs fitted with parachutes for the purpose of delivering poison gas or germ payloads.
- * That Iraq had produced 550 artillery shells filled with mustard gas.
- * That Iraq had produced or imported 107,500 casings for chemical weapons.
- * That Iraq had produced at least 157 aerial bombs filled with germ agents.
- * That Iraq had produced 25 missile warheads containing germ agents (anthrax, aflatoxin, and botulinum).

Again, this list of weapons of mass destruction is not what the Iraqi government was *suspected* of producing. (That would be a longer list, including an Iraqi nuclear program that the German intelligence service had concluded in 2001 might produce a bomb within three years.) It was what the Iraqis *admitted* producing. And it is this list of weapons--not any CIA analysis under either the Clinton or Bush administrations--that has been at the heart of the Iraq crisis.

For in all the years after those admissions, the Iraqi government never explained, or even tried to explain, to anyone's satisfaction, including most recently, that of Hans Blix, what had become of the huge quantities of deadly weapons it had produced. The Iraqi government repeatedly insisted that most of the weapons had been "secretly" destroyed. When asked to produce credible evidence of the destruction--the location of destruction sites, fragments of destroyed weapons, some documentation of the destruction, anything at all--the Iraqis refused. After 1995, the U.N. weapons inspection process became a lengthy cat-and-mouse game, as inspectors tried to cajole Iraqis to divulge information about the fate of these admitted stockpiles of weapons. The inspectors fanned out across the country looking for weapons caches, stashes of documents, and people willing to talk. And sometimes, the inspectors uncovered evidence. Both American and French testers found traces of nerve gas on remnants of warheads, for instance. The Iraqis claimed the evidence had been planted.

After 1996, and partly as a consequence of the documents they had discovered and of Iraqi admissions, weapons inspectors must have started getting closer to uncovering what the Iraqis were hiding. For at about that time, inspectors' demands to visit certain facilities began to be systematically blocked by Saddam. There was the famous confrontation over the so-called "presidential palaces," actually vast complexes of buildings and warehouses, that Saddam simply declared off-limits to inspectors.

At the end of 1997, this limitation on the inspectors' freedom of movement precipitated an international crisis. The Clinton administration demanded that the inspectors be given full access to the "palaces." The Iraqis refused. Instead, Saddam demanded the removal of all Americans from the U.N. inspection team and an end to all U-2 flights over Iraq, and even threatened to shoot the planes down. In case

there was any doubt that his aim was to conceal weapons programs that the inspectors were getting close to discovering, Iraq at this time also began moving equipment that could be used to manufacture weapons out of the range of video cameras that had been installed by the U.N. inspection team.

The New York Times reported at the time that the U.N. weapons inspectors (*not* American intelligence) believed that Iraq possessed "the elements of a deadly germ warfare arsenal and perhaps poison gases, as well as the rudiments of a missile system" that could launch the warheads. But because of Saddam's action at the end of 1997, the Times reported, the U.N. inspection team could "no longer verify that Iraq is not making weapons of mass destruction" and specifically could not monitor "equipment that could grow seed stocks of biological agents in a matter of hours." Saddam's precipitating of this crisis was a bold move, aimed at splitting the U.N. Security Council and isolating the Clinton administration. And it worked. The Clinton administration tried but failed to get French and Russian support at the Security Council either for military action or for a tightening of sanctions to force Saddam to cease these activities and comply with his commitment to disarm. The French and Russian position by 1997 was that the "books" should be closed on Iraq's WMD programs, sanctions should be lifted, and relations with Saddam should be normalized. That remained the French position for the next five years.

It was in response to this crisis that we at this magazine began calling for Saddam Hussein's ouster by means of a ground invasion. And in a letter sent to President Clinton on January 26, 1998, we and a number of other former government officials urged military action against Saddam on the grounds that the situation had become untenable and perilous. As a result of recent events, we wrote, the United States could

no longer depend on our partners in the Gulf War coalition to continue to uphold the sanctions or to punish Saddam when he blocks or evades U.N. inspections. Our ability to ensure that Saddam Hussein is not producing weapons of mass destruction, therefore, has substantially diminished. Even if full inspections were eventually to resume, which now seems highly unlikely, experience has shown that it is difficult if not impossible to monitor Iraq's chemical and biological weapons production. The lengthy period during which the inspectors will have been unable to enter many Iraqi facilities has made it even less likely that they will be able to uncover all of Saddam's secrets. As a result, in the not-too-distant future we will be unable to determine with any reasonable level of confidence whether Iraq does or does not possess such weapons. Such uncertainty will, by itself, have a seriously destabilizing effect on the entire Middle East.

IN EARLY 1998, the Clinton administration, following this same logic, prepared for war against Iraq. On February 17, President Clinton spoke on the steps of the Pentagon to explain to the American people why war was necessary. The speech is worth excerpting at length, because it was then and remains today the fundamental case for the invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power.

President Clinton declared that the great threat confronting the United States and its allies was a lethal and "unholy axis" of international terrorists and outlaw states. "They will be all the more lethal if we

allow them to build arsenals of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and the missiles to deliver them." There was, Clinton declared, "no more clear example of this threat than Saddam Hussein's Iraq. His regime threatens the safety of his people, the stability of his region and the security of all the rest of us." Before the Gulf War of 1991, Clinton noted, "Saddam had built up a terrible arsenal, and he had used it. Not once, but many times in a decade-long war with Iran, he used chemical weapons against combatants, against civilians, against a foreign adversary and even against his own people." At the end of the Gulf War, Saddam had promised to reveal all his programs and disarm within 15 days. But instead, he had spent "the better part of the past decade trying to cheat on this solemn commitment." As Clinton explained:

Iraq repeatedly made false declarations about the weapons that it had left in its possession after the Gulf War. When UNSCOM would then uncover evidence that gave the lie to those declarations, Iraq would simply amend the reports. For example, Iraq revised its nuclear declarations four times within just 14 months, and it has submitted six different biological warfare declarations, each of which has been rejected by UNSCOM.

In 1995 Hussein Kamal, Saddam's son-in-law and the chief organizer of Iraq's weapons of mass destruction program, defected to Jordan. He revealed that Iraq was continuing to conceal weapons and missiles and the capacity to build many more. Then and only then did Iraq admit to developing numbers of weapons in significant quantities--and weapons stocks. Previously it had vehemently denied the very thing it just simply admitted once Saddam's son-in-law defected to Jordan and told the truth.

Now listen to this: What did it admit? It admitted, among other things, an offensive biological warfare capability, notably, 5,000 gallons of botulinum, which causes botulism; 2,000 gallons of anthrax; 25 biological-filled Scud warheads; and 157 aerial bombs. And I might say UNSCOM inspectors believe that Iraq has actually greatly understated its production. . . .

Next, throughout this entire process, Iraqi agents have undermined and undercut UNSCOM. They've harassed the inspectors, lied to them, disabled monitoring cameras, literally spirited evidence out of the back doors of suspect facilities as inspectors walked through the front door, and our people were there observing it and had the pictures to prove it. . . .

Over the past few months, as [the weapons inspectors] have come closer and closer to rooting out Iraq's remaining nuclear capacity, Saddam has undertaken yet another gambit to thwart their ambitions by imposing debilitating conditions on the inspectors and declaring key sites which have still not been inspected off limits, including, I might add, one palace in Baghdad more than 2,600 acres large. . . .

One of these presidential sites is about the size of Washington, D.C. . . .

It is obvious that there is an attempt here, based on the whole history of this operation since 1991, to protect whatever remains of his capacity to produce weapons of mass

destruction, the missiles to deliver them, and the feed stocks necessary to produce them. The UNSCOM inspectors believe that Iraq still has stockpiles of chemical and biological munitions, a small force of Scud-type missiles, and the capacity to restart quickly its production program and build many, many more weapons. . . .

Now, let's imagine the future. What if he fails to comply and we fail to act, or we take some ambiguous third route, which gives him yet more opportunities to develop this program of weapons of mass destruction and continue to press for the release of the sanctions and continue to ignore the solemn commitments that he made? Well, he will conclude that the international community has lost its will. He will then conclude that he can go right on and do more to rebuild an arsenal of devastating destruction.

And some day, some way, I guarantee you he'll use the arsenal. . . . In the next century, the community of nations may see more and more of the very kind of threat Iraq poses now--a rogue state with weapons of mass destruction, ready to use them or provide them to terrorists, drug traffickers, or organized criminals who travel the world among us unnoticed.

If we fail to respond today, Saddam, and all those who would follow in his footsteps, will be emboldened tomorrow by the knowledge that they can act with impunity, even in the face of a clear message from the United Nations Security Council, and clear evidence of a weapons of mass destruction program.

The Clinton administration did not in fact respond. War was averted by a lame compromise worked out by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan. But within a few months, Saddam was again obstructing U.N. inspectors, driving a deeper wedge into the U.N. Security Council and attempting to put a final end to the inspections process. He succeeded. At the end of 1998, the Clinton administration launched Operation Desert Fox, a four-day missile and bombing attack on Iraq that was aimed principally at known and suspected facilities for producing weapons of mass destruction and missiles. The effect of the bombings on Iraq's programs and stockpiles, however, was unknown, as Clinton acknowledges. But one effect of Operation Desert Fox was that Saddam expelled the U.N. inspectors altogether. Beginning in December 1998 and for the next four years, there were no U.N. inspectors in Iraq.

What did Saddam Hussein do during those four years of relative freedom? To this day, no one knows for sure. The only means of learning Iraqi activities during those years were intelligence, satellite photography, electronic eavesdropping, and human sources. The last of these was in short supply. And, as we now know, the ability to determine the extent of Saddam's programs only by so-called technical means was severely limited. American and foreign intelligence services pieced together what little information they could, but they were trying to illuminate a dark cave with a Bic lighter. Without a vast inspection team on the ground, operating unfettered and over a long period of time, it was clear that the great unanswered questions regarding Iraq--what happened to the old stockpiles of weapons and what new programs Saddam was working on--could never be answered.

The rest of the story, we assume, most people remember. The Bush administration's threat of war beginning last summer led France and Russia to reverse themselves and to start taking the Iraq

weapons issue seriously again. In U.N. Security Council Resolution 1441, the Security Council agreed on a new round of inspections, during which Saddam was to do finally what he had promised to do back in 1991 and ever since: make a clean breast of all his programs, answer all the unanswered questions about his admitted stockpiles of weapons, and fully disarm. Resolution 1441 demanded that, within 30 days, Iraq provide "a currently accurate, full, and complete declaration of all aspects of its programmes to develop chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, ballistic missiles, and other delivery systems such as unmanned aerial vehicles and dispersal systems designed for use on aircraft, including any holdings and precise locations of such weapons, components, sub-components, stocks of agents, and related material and equipment, the locations and work of its research, development and production facilities, as well as all other chemical, biological, and nuclear programmes, including any which it claims are for purposes not related to weapon production or material."

Iraq did not comply with this demand within 30 days--or, for that matter, within 90. In his March 6, 2003, report to the U.N. Security Council, Hans Blix reported that the declared stocks of anthrax and VX remained unaccounted for. In the last chance given to Iraq by Resolution 1441, Iraq had failed to provide answers. As Blix reported again in May 2003, "little progress was made in the solution of outstanding issues....the long list of proscribed items unaccounted for and as such resulting in unresolved disarmament issues was not shortened either by the inspections or by Iraqi declarations and documentation."

We have retold this long story for one simple reason: This is why George W. Bush and Tony Blair and Jose Maria Aznar led their governments and a host of others to war to remove the Saddam Hussein regime in March 2003. It was not, in the first instance, to democratize the Middle East, although we have always believed and still believe that the building of a democratic Iraq, if the United States succeeds in doing so, will have a positive impact on the Arab world. It was not to increase the chances of an Arab-Israeli peace, although we still believe that the removal of a dangerous radical tyrant like Saddam Hussein may make that difficult task somewhat easier. It was not because we believed Saddam Hussein had ordered the September 11 attack, although we believe the links between Saddam and al Qaeda are becoming clearer every day (see Stephen F. Hayes's article on page 33 of this issue). Nor did the United States and its allies go to war because we believed that some quantity of "yellowcake" was making its way from Niger to Iraq, or that Saddam was minutes away from launching a nuclear weapon against Chicago. We never believed the threat from Saddam was "imminent" in that sense.

The reason for war, in the first instance, was always the strategic threat posed by Saddam because of his proven record of aggression and barbarity, his admitted possession of weapons of mass destruction, and the certain knowledge of his programs to build more. It was the threat he posed to his region, to our allies, and to core U.S. interests that justified going to war this past spring, just as it also would have justified a Clinton administration decision to go to war in 1998. It was why Bill Clinton, Madeleine Albright, William Cohen, and many other top officials had concluded in the late 1990s that Saddam Hussein was an intolerable menace to his neighbors, to American allies, and ultimately to the United States itself, and therefore had eventually to be removed. It was also why a large number of

Democrats, including John Kerry and General Wesley Clark, expressed support for the war last year, before Howard Dean and his roaring left wing of the Democratic party made support for "Bush's war" untenable for Democratic candidates.

NOTHING THAT HAS or has not been discovered in Iraq since the end of the war changes this fundamental judgment. Those who always objected to the rationale for the war want to use the failure so far to discover large caches of weapons to re-litigate the question. Democrats fearful of their party's left wing are using it to jump off the positions they held last year. That's politics. But back in the real world, the fact that David Kay's inspections teams have not yet found out what happened to Saddam's admitted stockpiles is not surprising. U.N. weapons inspectors did not find those caches of weapons in 12 years; Kay and his team have had about four months. Yes, we wish Saddam had left his chemical munitions and biological weapons neatly stacked up in a warehouse somewhere marked on the outside with a big, yellow skull and crossbones. We wish he had published his scientists' nuclear designs in the daily paper. Or we wish we could find the "Dear Diary" entry where he explains exactly what happened to all the weapons he built. But he did not leave these helpful hints behind.

After Operation Iraqi Freedom, the U.S. military was led by an Iraqi to a part of the desert where, lo and behold, a number of MiG fighter jets had been buried under the sand. Note that the Americans did not discover the jets themselves. Discovering chemical and biological munitions will be somewhat harder. Kay recently reported to Congress that there are approximately 130 Ammunition Storage Points scattered across Iraq, a country the size of France. Many of the ammunition depots take up more than 50 square miles. Together they hold 600,000 tons of artillery shells, rockets, aviation bombs, and other ordnance. Under Saddam, U.N. inspectors learned, the Iraqi military stored chemical ordnance at the same ammunition depots where the conventional rounds were stored. Do you know how many of the 130 Iraqi ammunition depots have been searched since the end of the war? Ten. Only 120 to go.

Saddam Hussein had four years of unfettered activity in which to hide and reconfigure his weapons programs. Our intelligence on this, as we noted earlier, may have been lousy. David Kay's task has essentially been to reconstruct a story we don't know. In fact, he's learned quite a bit in a very short time. For instance, as Kay reported to Congress, his team has uncovered "dozens of WMD-related program activities and significant amounts of equipment that Iraq concealed from the U.N. *during the inspections that began in late 2002*" (emphasis added). In addition, based on admissions by Iraqi scientists and government officials, Kay and his team have discovered:

- * A clandestine network of laboratories and safehouses within the Iraqi Intelligence Service that contained equipment suitable for research in the production of chemical and biological weapons. This kind of equipment was explicitly mentioned in Hans Blix's requests for information, but was instead concealed from Blix throughout his investigations.

- * A prison laboratory complex, which may have been used in human testing of biological weapons agents. Iraqi officials working to prepare for U.N. inspections in 2002 and 2003 were explicitly ordered not to acknowledge the existence of the prison complex.

* So-called "reference strains" of biological organisms, which can be used to produce biological weapons. The strains were found in a scientist's home.

* New research on agents applicable to biological weapons, including Congo Crimean Hemorrhagic Fever, and continuing research on ricin and aflatoxin--all of which was, again, concealed from Hans Blix despite his specific request for any such information.

* Plans and advanced design work on new long-range missiles with ranges up to at least 1,000 kilometers--well beyond the 150-kilometer limit imposed on Iraq by the U.N. Security Council. These missiles would have allowed Saddam to threaten targets from Ankara to Cairo.

In addition to these banned activities, which were occurring right under the noses of the U.N. inspectors this past year, Kay and his team also discovered a massive effort to destroy evidence of weapons programs, an effort that began before the war and continued during it and even after the war. In the "looting" that followed the fall of Baghdad, computer hard drives were destroyed in government buildings--thus making the computers of no monetary value to actual looters. Kay also found documents burned or shredded. And people whom the Kay team tried to interview were in some cases threatened with retaliation by Saddam loyalists. Indeed, two of the scientists were subsequently shot. Others involved in the weapons programs have refused to talk for fear of eventual prosecution for war crimes.

Nevertheless, Kay has begun piecing together the story of what happened to Saddam's weapons and how he may have shifted direction in the years after 1998. It is possible that instead of building up large stockpiles of weapons, Saddam decided the safer thing would be to advance his covert programs for producing weapons but wait until the pressure was off to produce the weapons themselves. By the time inspectors returned to Iraq in 2002, Saddam was ready to be a little more forthcoming, because he had rejiggered his program to withstand somewhat greater scrutiny. Nevertheless, even then he could not let the inspectors see everything. Undoubtedly he hoped that if he could get through that last round, he would be home free, eventually without sanctions or further inspections.

There are no doubt some Americans who believe that this would have been an acceptable outcome. Or who believe that another six months of inspections would have uncovered all that Saddam was hiding. Or that a policy of "containment"--which included 200,000 troops on Iraq's borders as an inducement to permit inspections--could have been sustained indefinitely both at the U.N. Security Council and in Washington. We believe the overwhelming lesson of our history with Saddam is that none of these options would have succeeded. Had Saddam Hussein not been removed this year, it would have been only a matter of time before this president or some future president was compelled to take action against him, and in more dangerous circumstances.

There are people who will never accept this logic, who prefer to believe, or claim to believe, that the whole Iraq affair was, in the words of Ted Kennedy, a "fraud" "made up in Texas" for political gain, or who believe that it was the product of a vast conspiracy orchestrated by a tiny little band of "neoconservatives." Some of the people propagating this conspiratorial view of the Iraq war are now running for the Democratic nomination for president; one of them is even a former general who led the war against Slobodan Milosevic in 1999. We wish them the best of luck selling their conspiracy

theories to the American people. But we trust Bill Clinton won't be stumping for them on this particular issue.

--Robert Kagan & William Kristol